

Adam Smith and Coleridge on the Love of Systems

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The Romantic era was, as Dorothy Wordsworth noted in 1797, an ‘age of systems,’ and S. T. Coleridge was certainly no stranger to this fact.¹ A number of literary critics have traced Coleridge’s lifelong fascination with philosophical, economic, and political systems, and the recent publication of the *Opus Maximum* in the *Collected Works* has enabled further investigation into his attempts to synthesize the various strands of his philosophy into one coherent, systematic whole. Yet even as scholars have acknowledged the importance of concepts of system for Coleridge’s thought, much of this critical attention has been focused on his later engagement with the systems of German philosophy, particularly those of Immanuel Kant and F.W.J. Schelling, rather than his early interest in systems in the 1790s. We can discern Coleridge’s early engagement with systems in texts such as ‘A Moral and Political Lecture’ and *Conciones ad Populum* (1795), in which he urged his listeners ‘to destroy pernicious systems’ but at the same time to spare ‘their misguided adherents.’² In those texts, he suggested that failure to establish a proper relationship to system was potentially deadly, for it could lead to savagery and sacrifice. ‘Like the fane of Tescalipoca the Mexican Deity,’ Coleridge explained, tyranny is ‘erected with human skulls and cemented with human blood,’ and he argued that an improper comportment toward systems was a sure path to tyranny (*ibid.*).

David Simpson and Clifford Siskin are among the handful of critics who have focused on the more general history of systems in the 1790, and Simpson has focused on Coleridge specifically, arguing that his attack on systems in the 1790s was part a long conservative anti-theoretical tradition which received its paradigmatic ‘Romantic’ form in the work of Edmund Burke. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke blamed the excesses of the French Revolution on what he called ‘the surfeit and indigestion of systems,’ and in *Letters on a Regicidal Peace*, he declared even more forcefully that ‘[w]e are at war with a system.’³ Simpson acknowledges that Burke’s organicist image of the nation could itself be understood as ‘self-adjusting system,’ but he argues that such a notion served as a cover by means of which Burke ‘align[ed] the supervisory function of a patrician class together with a laissez-faire rhetoric of natural evolution.’⁴ Simpson argues that Coleridge simply translated Burke’s ‘alignment’ of patrician supervision and laissez-faire economics into a more ‘conventionally philosophic context,’ and thus he suggests that there is a fundamental continuity between Coleridge’s attack on systems in 1795 and his

¹ Letter from Dorothy Wordsworth to Mrs. John Marshall, March 19, 1797; letter 65 in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, Vol. I: The Early Years, 1787-1805*, Second Edition, ed. by Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 180.

² Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: Volume I: Lectures on Politics and Religion*, ed. by Lewis Patton and Peter Mann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1971), 18.

³ Edmund Burke, *The Works of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, Third edition, 12 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1869), vol. IV: 16; vol. V: 250.

⁴ David Simpson, *Romanticism, Nationalism, and the Revolt Against Theory* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 59.

later, more clearly conservative turn to the systems of German philosophy (60).

Simpson's account is compelling and useful, but I am not sure that it is fully able to account for the politics of the term 'system' in the 1790s. Even as Burke attacked the French system, for example, he also explicitly praised what he called the 'British political system,' and at the same time that Coleridge railed against 'pernicious systems' he was still committed to what he called the 'system' of Pantisocracy.⁵ While it is true that many conservative authors in the 1790s shunned the *genre* of system, the willingness of an author like Burke to embrace the *language* of system suggests that this term may have occupied multiple points in the political geography of Romantic era Britain.

In order to help articulate more fully the politics of system-love in the 1790s, especially as these relate to Coleridge, I discuss here what may seem a rather unlikely text: Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Smith's text is not generally understood as part of the Romantic canon, in large part because it was first published in 1759. However, Smith's final revisions of the text were undertaken and published in 1790, and they included, significantly, extensive reflections on the relationships between systems, aesthetics, and social progress. What I shall argue, in brief, is that Smith's reflections on systems and beauty established the paradigm for Romantic-era debates about the virtues of systems in the 1790s, and for Coleridge's engagement with systems in the 1790s more particularly. In making this argument, I first outline four different eighteenth century senses of the term 'system.' I then consider Smith's suggestion that one could distinguish between two kinds of system-love: on the one hand, a love based on the misrecognition of a part of the system for a whole, and on the other, a love for the system as a whole. Smith linked each form of system-love to a form of sacrifice, and I conclude by discussing the ways in which Smith's distinction between modes of system-love, and the forms of sacrifice they encouraged, created a paradigm that established the terms of debate for authors as diverse as Burke, Coleridge, and Godwin.⁶

I. The Four Systems of the Eighteenth Century

'System' could mean a number of different things for eighteenth century authors, and it is useful to distinguish between four different eighteenth century senses of this term. First, 'system' could refer to a *genre* of literary production. Hundreds, if not thousands, of works in this genre were produced in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, ranging from discussions of natural philosophy to theology to moral philosophy and oratory; examples include Thomas Rutherford's *A System of Natural Philosophy* (1748), Ralph Cudworth's *The True Intellectual System of the Universe* (1678), John Stirling's *A System of Rhetoric* (1733), and so on. Both Simpson and Siskin have suggested

⁵ See, e.g., letters 80 and 93 in Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, 6 vols., edited by Earl Leslie Griggs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), vol. 1: 149, 163.

⁶ This article presents a condensed version of two related arguments that I make at greater length in 'Beautiful and Orderly Systems: Adam Smith on the Aesthetics of Political Improvement' (in Eric Schliesser and Leonidas Montes, eds., *New Voices on Adam Smith*, with an Introduction by Knud Haakonssen (New York: Routledge, forthcoming)) and 'The Fane of Tescalipoca: S. T. Coleridge on the Sacrificial Economies of Systems in the 1790s.'

that the genre of system tended to have a radical political valence, for conservative authors were able to successfully link it to extreme forms of Protestant dissent that emerged during the English Civil War.⁷

Second, system could be used as a ‘morally prescriptive explanation’ of the nature of reality: that is, as an explanation of the true nature of the world that, once recognized by the reader, would morally improve him or her. Shaftesbury, for example, contended that the universe was best understood as a set of interlocking and co-dependent ‘systems.’ Each animal was itself a system; its species was another system, which was joined with other living systems; these, in turn, were parts of the ‘systems of a globe or earth’ that was itself part of the solar system, and so on.⁸ If, as Siskin and Simpson suggest, system as *genre* tended toward a radical politics, a much more conservative vision was embedded in the sense of system as a description of the metaphysical structure of nature. Shaftesbury, for example, suggested that the interests of any particular social group, or ‘part,’ could always be negated by appeals to the more expansive ‘whole’ within which conflicts were purportedly overcome. He also explicitly suggested that sacrifice was the necessary corollary of the love of nature’s systems. In *The Moralists, a Philosophical Rhapsody*, for example, ‘Philocles’ argues that ‘in the several orders of terrestrial forms a resignation is required, a sacrifice and mutual yielding of natures one to another’ (245), and he translated this directly into political terms, arguing that, by nature, some classes were confined to labor and others to the benefits of that labor (214).

Third, the term ‘system’ could be used to describe an institution that was organized to achieve a particular result (often with the help, or implicit support, of the state): for example, the *System of the Law of Marine Insurances*; the *System for the Compleat Interior Management and Oeconomy of a Battalion of Infantry*—or, more infamously, the ‘system of slavery.’ Finally, Clifford Siskin has suggested that by the end of the eighteenth century, system had also come to refer to the totality of social institutions, or what he calls ‘The System.’ ‘“The System,”’ Siskin writes, ‘as in that which, in its most popular form, works both too well—“you can’t beat The System”—and not well enough—it always seems to “break down.”’⁹ In this sense of the term, ‘system’ denoted the oppressive set of institutions and forces that determined the field of individual or collective choice, but which also (and by that token) constituted even that sense of resistant subjectivity.

II. System in the First and Final Editions of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*

While the first three of these senses of the term system were in common usage by the mid eighteenth century, Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was one of the first texts to provide something like a ‘meta-theory’ of the

⁷ Simpson, *Romanticism*, esp. 19-39; Clifford Siskin, ‘1798: The Year of the System,’ in *1798: The Year of the Lyrical Ballads*, ed. by Richard Cronin (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1988), 9-31 and ‘Novels and Systems,’ *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34: 2 (2001): 202-215.

⁸ Anthony Ashley Cooper, Third Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times*, ed. by Lawrence E. Klein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 169.

⁹ Siskin, ‘Novels and Systems,’ 202.

relationship between these different meanings of the term. First published in 1759, this text is best known for Smith's discussion of sympathy. However, Smith also devoted two sizeable sections of the book to a consideration of 'systems.' I focus here on the comments he makes in Part IV, entitled 'Of the EFFECT of UTILITY upon the Sentiment of Approbation.'¹⁰

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 'system' denotes any practical plan or institution that produces (or aims to produce) a certain result, and in Part IV of the book, Smith argues that judgments about the beauty of objects and institutions are in fact really judgments about the usefulness, or utility, of systems. Smith argues that people fall in love with the beauty of systems in two different ways. First, we can *consciously* recognize the beauty of a system, and seek to instantiate that system in reality, in which case our perception of the beauty of a system is a function of our *disinterested* sense of its utility. Smith's example is the public police, and he writes that:

When a patriot exerts himself for the improvement of any part of the public police, his conduct does not always arise from pure sympathy with the happiness of those who are to reap the benefit of it. [Rather, t]he perfection of police...[is a] noble and magnificent objec[t]
(IV.1.11).

Our perception of beauty in this case does not depend on any advantage that will accrue to us, either as individuals or as part of collectivity, from the institution of this system. However, this form of disinterest does not immobilize us; by contrast, it draws us forward, and 'interests' us in whatever can further this system.

However, in addition to this conscious perception of the beauty of a system, Smith contends that people often perceive systems through a sort of synecdochal logic, taking a part for the whole, but then forgetting that they have done so. This confusion explains, for example, why some individuals become obsessed with obtaining what are, from an individual point of view, essentially useless objects, such as palaces or gardens. The beauty of these objects is not simply admired, but produces social praxis, encouraging people into forms of apparently irrational behavior, as they expend far more in effort than they could ever hope to receive in pleasure from the objects they seek. The end result of such efforts, Smith concludes, is invariably disappointment, for

in the languor of disease and the weariness of old age, the pleasures of the vain and empty distinctions of greatness disappear. In his heart he curses ambition, and vainly regrets the ease and indolence of youth, pleasures which are fled forever, and which he has foolishly sacrificed for what, when he has got it, can afford him no real satisfaction
(IV.I.8).

¹⁰ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1984). All subsequent citations to this edition are parenthetical and follow the standard form of part-section-chapter-paragraph (e.g., III.ii.1.3 or IV.1.10).

This is a tragic narrative, for knowledge always arrives after action; we realize too late that we mistook the parts for the whole, and that our real love was for the harmony of the system that produced those parts, rather than the parts themselves.

Yet Smith also suggests that, however tragic this imaginary confusion of element for system is for the individual, it was precisely such a confused love of system that led to sacrifices that first liberated humans from natural constraints, and which continue to make social progress possible. ‘It is well that nature imposes upon us in this manner,’ Smith writes, for it is this ‘which first prompted [humans] to cultivate the ground, to build houses, to found cities and commonwealths, and to invent and improve all the sciences and arts’ (IV.1.10). Systems may be imaginary, corresponding to nothing in nature, but precisely because of this they allow humans to overcome what is ‘given’ by nature. The tragedy of individual sacrifices benefits, and enables, the harmony of civilization itself.

In the first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith concluded his discussion of system-love with a reflection on the relationship between the three senses of the term system that I noted above: that is, system as (1) genre, (2) metaphysical structure of the universe, and (3) institution. Smith suggested that discourse *about* systems tended to produce converts to the institutions described. He suggested, for example, that if one were to describe ‘the great system of public police’ *as* a system—that is, if one were to describe ‘the connexions and dependencies of its several parts, their mutual subordination to one another, and their general subserviency to the happiness of the society’—then it was ‘scarce possible that a man should listen to a discourse of this kind, and not feel himself animated to some degree of public spirit’ (IV.1.11). In other words, institutional systems could be introduced and encouraged through the genre of system, which in turn tended to promote nature’s goal to civilize societies. As a result, Smith suggested, ‘political disquisitions,’ in which the ‘several systems of civil government’ were described, were ‘of all works of speculation the most useful’ (*ibid.*).

By 1790, however, Smith had come to reconsider some of his claims about the love of system. He left Part IV as it was, but expanded on the negative possibilities of the love of system in Part VI, his major addition to the 1790 edition. Smith suggested that in ‘times of public discontent, faction, and disorder’ (VI.ii.2.12), the love of beautiful systems—which under normal conditions, further civilized the world—could become separated from both morality and political stability. During these periods of instability, he wrote,

a certain spirit of system is apt to mix itself with that public spirit which is founded upon the love of humanity... This spirit of system commonly takes the direction of that more gentle public spirit; always animates it, and often inflames it even to the madness of fanaticism.

(VI.ii.2.15)

Social transformation becomes dangerous, Smith argued, when the love of the beauty of systems became so fully self-referential as to become an end in itself. In these cases, '[t]he great body of the party are commonly intoxicated with the imaginary beauty of this ideal system, of which they have no experience, but which has been represented to them in all the most dazzling colours in which the eloquence of their leaders could paint it' (VI.ii.2.15). Smith's solution to this form of political and cultural instability was remarkably similar to the vision of conservatism being articulated at the same time by Edmund Burke, for Smith argued that

[t]he man whose public spirit is prompted altogether by humanity and benevolence, will respect the established powers and privileges even of individuals, and still more those of the great orders and societies, into which the state is divided (VI.ii.2.16).

Yet even in the 1790 edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Smith was not completely opposed to the love of system, even in its fanatical forms, for he argued that an overpowering love of system was sometimes necessary for social stability, to the extent that it enabled socially beneficial forms of conscious self-sacrifice. The military, for example, created conditions in which droves of '[g]ood soldiers' are able to 'cheerfully sacrifice their own little systems to the prosperity of a greater system' (VI.ii.3.4). What concerned Smith, however, was the *amount* and the *speed* of change. The problem with the 'man of system,' Smith writes, is that he insists upon 'establishing all at once, and in spite of all opposition, every thing which that idea [of the system] may seem to require' (*ibid.*).

Conclusion: Smith, Coleridge and the Systems of the 1790s

Smith's distinction between two kinds of system-love and two corresponding modes of sacrifice is extremely useful in our attempts to understand the politics of systems in the 1790s, and by extension, Coleridge's engagement with system in that decade. While Simpson is no doubt correct that there is a long 'radical' tradition committed to the *genre* of system, Smith's distinction highlights the fact that *both* conservatives and radicals attempted to distinguish good from bad systems, and both groups also sought to determine that distinction by linking aesthetic perceptions of beauty to modes of sacrifice. Burke, for example, in effect privileged Smith's mode of 'unconscious' love of systems over the conscious perception of systems, arguing that the beauty of dimly perceived systems moderated progress by dressing up the British system in 'pleasing illusions,' whereas commitment to fully recognized systems accelerated change beyond control.¹¹ On the other end of the political spectrum, William Godwin did not dispute Burke's claim that social change must proceed slowly, but he implied that perception of the beauty of a more truthful system contained its own principle of moderation, and thus,

¹¹ Burke, *Works*, III: 332.

‘systemitizers’ could play an important role in such moderate change.¹²

In the 1790s, Coleridge’s efforts to assess the virtues and dangers of systems were also articulated along the lines of this Smith’s schema. In *Conciones ad Populum*, for example, Coleridge initially attempted to make a fourfold—rather than simply twofold—distinction between different modes of system-love, aesthetic perception and sacrifice. He distinguishes between four classes of ‘professed friends of Freedom’ on the basis of the modes of sacrifice they practice: the first class offers ‘no sacrifices to the divinity of active Virtue,’ the second class is all too willing to make the ‘Altar of Freedom stream with blood,’ and the sacrifices of the third group are based on self-interest. Coleridge argues that only the fourth class, who ‘sacrifice all energies of heart and head,’ practice sacrifice properly.¹³ He links these modes of sacrifice to the comportment of each class of professed friends of Freedom to systems, arguing that the first three classes—that is, the ‘majority of Democrats’—confuse systems with their parts, for they ‘attribute to the system which they reject, all the evils existing under it’ (37). This confusion is motivated by a tendency toward abstraction (citing Burke, Coleridge suggests that they ‘contemplat[e] truth and justice in the nakedness of abstraction’). Yet the fourth class of patriots does not eschew systems entirely, but is rather composed of those who conform most closely to what Coleridge called, in his 1795 *Lectures on Revealed Religion*, Jesus’s ‘system of morality’ and God’s ‘perfect system of morality’ (160, 161). Coleridge thus ends up, like Smith, with a twofold explanation of the possible modes system-love, and, like Smith, he also privileges systems that promote *self*-sacrifice.

I do not have space here to consider the relationship between Coleridge’s early engagement with Smith’s paradigm of system-love and his later turn to German conceptions of systems. What I am suggesting, however, is that Coleridge’s engagement with system in the 1790s unfolds within a fundamentally different paradigm than that which guided his later interest. The period between 1797 and 1800 thus takes on a new significance, for during this period both ‘system’ and ‘sacrifice’ drop out of Coleridge’s writings and correspondence. This suggests that these years—often presented as the period of Coleridge’s apostasy—represents one of the most radical moments of his political career in the 1790s. As Raimonda Modiano notes, it was in these years that Coleridge began to question the possibility of making viable distinctions between sacrificer and sacrificed, and ‘good’ and bad’ forms of sacrifices.¹⁴ This, combined with the temporary disappearance of ‘system’ from his writing, suggests that he had come to fundamentally question the paradigm of systems-love that was to a large extent the common ground of political discourse in the 1790s.

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¹² William Godwin, *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice, and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness*, 2 volumes, London: G. G. J. and J. Robinson, 1793; reprint edition, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (New York: Woodstock Books, 1992), 221.

¹³ Coleridge, *Collected Works: Volume I*, 37-48.

¹⁴ Raimonda Modiano, ‘Sameness or Difference? Historicist Readings of *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*’ in S. T. Coleridge: *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, ed. Paul Fry (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1998), pp. 187-219.